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ABSTRACT

This book is designed to help the person invited to, or expected to attend, a dialogue group on intercultural or interracial relations. It helps the participant be comfortable in such discussions and derive personal benefit from them. While "dialogue" simply means talking together, an organized dialogue session may actually be a class or a forum for speeches, negotiation, debate, or analyzing issues. It should be a kind of conversation in which participants work together for increased self-knowledge. The participant should prepare for the session by determining its purpose, the background and qualifications of the facilitator, and the composition of the group. Reviewing one's own values before a dialogue on interracial or intercultural relations helps ensure that the participant is ready to discuss these issues. The common ground rules for dialogue are founded on mutual respect. Disagreement is acceptable; attacks are not. Specific tips are given about approaches and terms to avoid. The societal value of dialogue is that it connects us to one another, and the individual benefits may result when acknowledging the many pitfalls one can avoid. (SLD)

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When We Talk

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This Book is for (you) if...

- You have been invited to an interracial/intercultural dialogue group, or are expected to attend one at work,
- You don't know what to expect of such a group, or are afraid you might say the wrong thing,
- You are uncomfortable about participating in discussion about race, ethnicity, cultural, and intergroup relations and issues, and
- You want to get some personal benefit for the time and energy that you put in.

s complete without the techniques that are central to "dialogue."

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We also recommend you review this booklet if you are involved in planning a dialogue session.

WHY BOTHER?

If you are required to attend a dialogue (e.g. at work), you might think it will be a waste of time. Try to keep an open mind. There can be something in it for you.

A good dialogue experience can sharpen your people skills — enable you to relate better and communicate more effectively.

We are aware of communication barriers such as language differences and heavy accents. But speaking the same language with little or no accent does not assure that we will connect with one another. Dialogue skill can help.

"Dialogue skill" as we describe it here, is useful not only in the workplace and in public exchanges, but in every part of life. It contributes to friendships, families, and negotiations of all kinds. No inventory of communication skills is complete without the techniques that are central to "dialogue."

We recommend that you learn about dialogue, and use it to your advantage.

...Ask some questions...

What is "Dialogue"?

The casual definition of "dialogue" is simply talking together, conversation, perhaps discussion.

An organized dialogue session may be something else entirely. Its character depends on what the organizers want to accomplish and on the facilitator's training, personality, skills, and agenda.

>>>> Some meetings that are called dialogues are actually cross-cultural education classes, forums for speech-making, negotiations, debates, or meetings for analyzing issues and planning action.

>>>> Dialogue is none of these. Rather, it is a kind of conversation where participants work together for increased self-knowledge. It is conversation in which participants agree to listen to one another without making judgments. In dialogue, any honest statement, whether logical or not, rational or not, is received as a valid expression of that person's experience. Genuine dialogue requires more effort than the things that are called dialogue but are not.

Dialogue has been used by businesses and other organizations to examine the assumptions and beliefs that have determined the organizations' culture and systems. Such sessions have led to a sense of community, and organizational change and growth.

Dialogues may be single-session events, or a series of a set number. They seldom are ongoing meetings. When they are ongoing, it is generally because participants find that they have a particular affinity for one another. Meetings may then include cultural sharing, and work projects that the group considers needed, worthwhile, and within its abilities. Members may also help one another to think through the implications of local and national issues and events.

Recently community leaders have called for interracial and intercultural dialogue as one way to open lines of communication in a time of increased intergroup tensions and conflicts.

We offer this booklet to give participants background information, and to help them benefit from their involvement.

Should You attend?

If your participation is optional, ask some questions to determine whether it sounds worthwhile. If you have been directed to attend, you might still want to ask the questions.

1. What is the objective? Objectives that are too specific (e.g. to reduce absenteeism) or too ambitious (e.g. to increase productivity) indicate that the organizers have a purpose other than improving the health of the community or organization.

2. How large will the group be? Most facilitators say that 10 to 15 is best.

3. Who chose the facilitator? Do you trust his or her judgment?

4. What is the facilitator's background? Many come from mediation, which uses some of the same techniques as dialogue. But mediation and dialogue have different objectives. Mediators seek to settle disputes; dialogue facilitators seek to increase self-knowledge and understanding of others. There is some question among practitioners whether a person can switch between the two roles and do both well.

5. What training has the facilitator had? Be aware, however, that two facilitators can have the same training and still run very different sessions. They bring to the job their own personalities, philosophies, and biases. A good facilitator is aware of his or her sensitivities, strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations. These individual differences are perhaps the best argument for team facilitation. Co-facilitators can complement one another and compensate when necessary.

6. Will the participants be peers? When the dialogue subject is the organization and its direction, managers might be able to participate along with subordinates. When the subject is as sensitive and personal as intercultural relations, most facilitators say that only peers should be present.

7. Who will attend? Don't avoid the session just because one or two difficult personalities will be there. If the facilitator is skillful, it can work. The most important ingredient is honesty, not compatibility.

8. What is the facilitator's experience with groups like yours?

Signs of a Good Facilitator

A dialogue facilitator is responsible for planning and conducting sessions, but not for leading discussion in a given direction.

Rather, a good facilitator guides participants, helping them to honestly exchange views.

If possible, talk with someone who has been in a group led by the chosen facilitator. Ask questions about ethics, impartiality, temperament and style. For instance, did he or she:

- Abide by the ground rules? (Discussion of ground rules follows.)
- Admit to biases? (We all have biases.)
- Keep the group on track?
- Intervene when needed?
- Keep the conversation real (not theoretical)?
- Accept differences of opinion (rather than manipulate the group toward his or her way of thinking)?
- Help participants to converse among themselves (rather than spending time on his or her own story)?
- Skillfully break tension when it was destructive?

The most important question is this: Did the facilitator create a safe environment that encouraged sharing?

When you have read through this booklet, you'll know what you want from a facilitator.

How To Prepare Yourself

To reduce any anxiety you may have, and to get the most out of dialogue, give it some thought ahead of time.

1. Read any materials that are given to you by the planners. Read not just for factual information, but to understand the frame of reference.

2. As you go about your usual routine, think about the values, assumptions, and beliefs that influence your actions. They are central to our lives, but we seldom are conscious of them.

3. Think about your feelings concerning race and ethnicity. Race categories are no longer automatically accepted as they once were. They are based rather loosely on geography and heritage, with a lot of judgment calls. Race classifications are used for organizing data. For instance, scientists report the incidence of high blood pressure in a population group referred to as African American.

4. Have you ever wondered what people of other cultures think about things you've heard or seen or experienced? Think of what those things are. You will have the opportunity to find out.

5. Think about your willingness or hesitance to talk about yourself, to reveal and discuss your life and views. Some of us are moderately willing, some less so, some are even resistant.

6. Think about what experiences and relationships you've had that involved people different from you. How extensive or limited were they? Were your strongest impressions drawn from movies, T.V., and magazines?

7. Try to recall some conversations that you were anxious about, but that turned out well. Chances are, honesty was an important element. Probably, too, there were moments of discomfort, or even discord. But it was all worth it. Dialogue sessions, too, may sometimes be awkward or uncomfortable. But the results overall are worthwhile.

What's Likely to Happen in a Dialogue Session?

Most sessions run about two hours. It may take two or three sessions to learn the basis of dialogue - that is, non-judgmental listening and sharing. On the other hand, your group could learn it in just a few minutes, or it might never learn it.

There will probably be some in your dialogue group who are highly verbal and opinionated. Perhaps they need to let off steam before they can listen to anyone else.

Some individuals may be withdrawn, reluctant to speak at all. Still others, who have never had anyone willing to take the time to listen, may have an unending chain of stories to tell.

Be sure that the ground rules meet your needs.

Ground Rules

Successful dialogue requires risk-taking. The risk is that if you speak honestly others may judge you and think that you are weak, or hostile, or wrong-thinking. Most of us share the unvarnished truth only with people we've come to trust over many years, or with people whose opinion is unimportant to us. In those situations we feel safe. Safety is essential to dialogue.

In a well-conducted dialogue you'll be asked to help establish ground rules. What does it take to make you feel safe? Be sure that the ground rules meet your needs.

>>>> Some common ground rules are:

- Respect one another
- No physical or verbal attacks
- No name-calling
- No cursing
- No interrupting
- Participants may choose to remain silent (except during self-introductions)
- Each person speaks as an individual, not as a representative of a group
- Be honest
- Don't dominate the time
- If you feel overwhelmed, leave the room to compose yourself
- Disagreement is acceptable
- Expressions of anger are acceptable
- Everything said is confidential
- Participants will make every effort to attend every session, and to be on time.

Your group will devise its own set of ground rules.

If group members don't remind one another when ground rules are broken, the facilitator will intervene.

The ground rule that is most difficult (or impossible) to keep is confidentiality. It requires a lot of willpower and self-discipline. And the more startling the information, the harder it is to keep to yourself. For example, the day the Queen of England ordered the Prince and Princess to divorce, that news spread faster and wider than the news that scientists had identified a gene causing breast cancer.

Tips on Dialogue

Dialogue is simple, but not easy. It means that people listen to one another. They accept as authentic and valid what any person says, even if it contradicts their own perceptions and beliefs.

Here are a few suggestions that may help.

1. Consider yourself an ally of other participants. If you set out together to learn to dialogue and to broaden your knowledge of others' life experiences, you can't fail.
2. Assume that others are sincere in what they say.
3. Listen not only for the facts that are related, but for the reasons behind the statements. How did the speaker arrive at the conclusions he/she did?
4. Don't take things too literally. Listen for meanings, not just words.
5. Be patient. A question that may be easy for you, e.g. "What is your racial and ethnic identity?" may be hard for others. Give them time to work their way through and find the words.
6. Accept silences as part of the process. Don't rush to fill the space.
7. Seek clarification. If something is not clear, or if you want to learn more, ask questions. It helps to restate what you think was said, so that the speaker can correct the impression and expand on it.
8. Avoid asking "why." It tends to sound judgmental. Ask "what" instead.
9. Avoid questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no." A single-word answer may discourage further conversation.
10. Be alert to generalizations, both yours and others. A statement may be true of "some," or maybe "most," but surely not "all."
11. Use the identifying terms for people that they use for themselves, e.g. Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Mexican. There's usually a reason behind their choice of group names.

12. Say how an experience or statement affected or affects you. Make what are called "I Messages." For example: "I feel good when people try to learn a few Spanish words, and when they ask me about Mexican customs and traditions."

13. Use real-life examples as reference points, "I read the Times article about Asian women having surgery on their eyelids and I...."

14. Be honest. But don't release all pent-up anxiety or guilt at the expense of others.

15. Try not to be defensive. Few of us are smooth talkers. We inadvertently step on toes. Keep the big picture in mind.

16. Watch your body language. Be sure it doesn't say, "I'm bored," "I'm superior," "I don't believe you."

17. Do not doubt the authenticity of what you hear. Each person is the highest authority on what she or he feels.

18. Support others when they try to say something. They may repeat themselves, stammer, pause a long time as they try to get it out.

19. Understand that you're getting just a glimpse of participants' lives. Two hours is a very brief time, and not many of us are good at organizing our thoughts on the spot.

20. Refuse to give up on anyone, no matter how unpleasant, opinionated, or difficult they are to deal with.

21. Accept that you and others may hold opposing views. Resist the temptation to find solutions, to correct, argue, or counter.

22. Be willing to have your biases changed.

23. Don't be impatient to talk about broader issues and problems. If and when the group moves on to analysis and action planning, things will go easier if you know and trust one another.

Words to Avoid

As we speak, we make wording choices. We can choose words that help communication, or hinder it.

Some word choices can inadvertently separate us into opposing groups. They can sound superior or challenging. They can be overly broad, generalizing to a whole group or population. Or they can express judgments and place blame.

It may take conscious effort to avoid these obstacles.

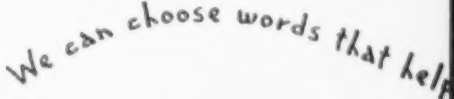
Here are some examples of words to avoid.

Words that separate us:

"You people...."
"Jewish people understand...."
"... in their Mercedes."

Words that patronize:

"My dear young lady, ..."
"Of course you would never do such a thing...."
"You understand the importance of ...."



Words that challenge:

"Have you ever seen a Latino who....?"
"You don't know what it's like to...."
"Why don't you just..?"

Words that generalize:

"Korean merchants never...."
"Parents who send their kids to private schools...."
"African American kids always...."

Words that judge or place blame:

"It's because White people...."
"If it weren't for...."
"You think you know...."

communication, or hinder it.

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Good Words

It helps to use words that put others at ease and indicate your willingness to listen and learn.

If you sincerely recognize that your experience and knowledge is limited (as everyone's is), and that you could learn from others, let them know it. But be sure that you're not being falsely humble. Don't say anything that you don't mean.

Here are some phrases that encourage dialogue:

"I'd like to know more about...."

"Help me to understand...."

"I don't know much about...."

"What can you tell me about...."

"I read a magazine article that said...what do you think?"

"I'm not familiar with...."

"Would you repeat that in other words?"

"I've heard that.... What is your experience?"

"How do you react to...?"

"Is that a stereotype?" (This is one yes/no question that's likely to stimulate discussion.)

"Is there any basis for that generalization?"

"I don't mean to sound critical, I'm just trying to understand...."

"Please tell me if what I've said offends you."

"I know that I have a bias about...."

"My experience with ... is limited to...."

"Thank you for explaining ...."

"I'm glad that you trusted us enough to express...."

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In Conclusion

Dialogue is a lifelong practice. You can use it at different times, in different settings, with different people. More times than not, it will be helpful.

Some people say that a dialogue has been successful if it leaves you with lingering questions, just as you replay the plot of a good movie, or the themes of a good book.

The societal value of dialogue is that it connects us to one another. It makes us aware in clear and personal terms of how our actions affect others.

The individual benefits as well. When a person has dialogue skill, she or he can avoid many communication pitfalls.

A person who is known as a good listener, who respects and validates others, is valued by family, friends, colleagues, and organizations.

f dialogue is that it connects us to one another.

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